

I had to haul my saddle to the shop the other day for a final trip. It hadn't got worn enough to hurt a horse's back, but had begun to leave dry spots under the saddle blanket. Many more vueltas, and it would have been rubbing setfasts that a county agent couldn't cure. Once your rig develops an appetite for hide and hair, the trading grounds are the only route.

Herders, as you know, set great store in their leather goods and their riding stock. Hombres who could peel 50 pounds of Spanish onions without wetting their eyelashes can get mighty misty eyed over a worn-out saddle or a crippled horse being headed toward the dump grounds.

Don't get the idea that I felt any sorrow over taking mine to the saddleshop. What I regretted was not realizing what was happening 23 years ago when I first bought it. The same money would have purchased a half interest in a good armadillo farm. Tourists, you know, will pay a lot more money for a shell basket than a drover could net on a fast day. Selling the claws off armadillos would beat the rangeland wage; I never saw a rich armadillo farmer, but I sure have seen a multitude of insolvent horse riders.

What I should have done instead of ordering another saddle was to take that piece of hide-chewing leather and hire a DC8 caterpillar to bury it so deep that my kids would never know their father was so foolish. A landscape artist could have been hired to hide the grave. Then none of my descendants could have chanced catching the cowboy fever, unless they got careless drinking at the public fountains at the rodeos. As it is, death taxes don't give a man a chance to will his kids much more than his pocket knife. The least he should do was to not leave an item that could corrupt their entire lives.

Trading my old saddle off, however, was the best choice. In a few more years, that model is going to be as obsolete as dishpan. Saddlemakers are going to be forced to start fitting them with directional signals and parking lights. Riding schools are already thinking of teaching their pupils how to make traffic signals. As the arenas and the asphalt become the paddocks, equine traffic jams are going to be a problem.

On the rodeo circuits, the grand entry parades are presently more dangerous than eating the food from the concession stands. Horse trainers that could teach a water buffalo to neckrein couldn't handle some of those parade ponies. The girls holding the flags are rated higher on the actuary tables than mountain climbers are. I'd lose a \$40 hat before I'd climb in the ring during one of those padded saddle stampedes. I don't know how they've got along this long without having blinker lights. The best Volkswagen jockey in West Germany couldn't maneuver in one of those mounted melees.

I don't think I ever told you this, but back when the boss passed on, I considered throwing in his saddle along with the deal. He was awfully fond of the riders and the ridden. At the time, it seemed like he'd be lost without a saddle.

However, trail endings always do make you have a bunch of wild thoughts. Saddles wouldn't be any use in the life beyond. If a fellow went up, the harp payers wouldn't want shod horses clattering on the golden streets, if he went downwards, the heat would ruin the leather. So either direction, a saddle would be in the way. I suppose that sort of thinking ended with the Indians. As you know, they were prone to try to outsmart the tax collectors by taking their estate along in their last blanket wrapping. I doubt if they ever really got away with one arrow point. Inheritance tax men in that age were plenty sharp, too.

My new rig will be ready in a few days. By the time the leather quits squeaking I'll be wondering again why fate didn't lead to a richer life.

The man who said that life begins at 40 must have about 29 years old...